



July 2006

GEAR UP Program Update

Addressing the Pre-Collegiate Years

This is an informational report to the members of the Higher Education Coordinating Board at its July 27, 2006 meeting. No board action is necessary at this time.

Background

The Higher Education Coordinating Board (HECB) administers the Washington State GEAR UP program. GEAR UP—which stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs—is a federally-funded college access program.

Since the program was authorized in 1998, Washington has received two federal GEAR UP grants:

- The HECB administered Grant One from 1999-2005 (a total of \$19 million).
- In 2005, the HECB received funding for Grant Two, to fund an additional six years of the program (a total of \$21 million).

This report provides an overview and assessment of the Washington State GEAR UP program, and highlights a proposal to expand the program to underserved areas of the state.

Congress authorized the GEAR UP program under the 1998 Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1965. Washington was one of 21 states that received the initial federal grants in 1999. The governor designated the HECB to manage the GEAR UP grant.

The Washington State GEAR UP project strives to:

- Reach students from low-income families early, beginning in seventh grade;
- Prepare them through tutoring and mentoring services to be academically ready for post-secondary education;
- Provide college awareness and college experiences to students and their parents; and
- Offer financial aid and college admissions information and assistance to parents.

Grant One

Under Grant One, the HECB signed up 2,040 students in 11 school districts between 1999 and 2005. From a combination of non-profit organizations, school districts, and governmental agencies, many of these students received year-round services (such as tutoring and mentoring) and participated in summer institutes and after-school programs. By the end of 2004, 413 GEAR UP students had begun using GEAR UP scholarships to attend college.

Grant Two

Under Grant Two, 1,035 seventh-grade students have been identified as “GEAR UP Scholars.” Scholars program services are provided through 12 school districts, using school district personnel and facilities.

The Scholars program will follow each student in the cohort from seventh grade through graduation, providing students and parents with:

- Individual and group tutoring, mentoring, summer and after-school programs;
- Academic assessment and counseling;
- Career and college exploration activities;
- Participation in financial aid and admissions outreach programs; and
- College scholarships (awarded in GET units) upon meeting program benchmarks.

Although direct grant services are limited to students in the cohort, the Scholars Project is specifically designed for school districts to extend it to succeeding classes of students. Elements of the current program that are key to meeting this goal are professional development opportunities provided to teachers, and partnerships created with the community. These efforts will ensure the school district is left with an established program curriculum, and experienced staff to deliver it when the GEAR UP grant ends.

Partnership Programs

In addition to the statewide programs managed by the HECB, the federal government also funds individual GEAR UP partnership programs. Colleges and universities, school districts, and businesses form partnerships to offer services. In Washington, nine partnership programs currently serve 22,000 students. Annual funding for partnership programs in Washington totals \$9 million. The board’s statewide GEAR UP program functions as a liaison and collaborates with the partnership programs to help encourage students to pursue college.

Success of GEAR UP in Washington

Data on Washington’s Grant One project show that the program has delivered what it promised by preparing students for entry into college. Between 2000 and 2004, 574 GEAR UP students graduated from high school (another 1,070 GEAR UP students were still in high school in 2005). Of the 574 graduates, 413 have enrolled in colleges and universities.

Compared to the state average, a larger percentage of GEAR UP high school graduates enrolled in higher education. Overall, 73 percent of GEAR UP graduates attend college, compared to a statewide average of 57 percent. HECB data also shows that the GEAR UP program has played an important role in preparing minority students to participate in college.

**Rates of high school graduates pursuing post-secondary education
GEAR UP vs. state average (2000–2004)**

Race/Ethnicity	GEAR UP	State	Difference
Hispanic	84%	47%	37%
Asian	77%	69%	8%
African American	55%	50%	5%
American Indian	52%	43%	9%
White	67%	56%	12%
Other	67%	50%	17%
Total	73%	57%	16%

Data source: Social and Economic Sciences Research Center WSU

<http://survey.sesrc.wsu.edu/gfs/Default.asp>

HECB WA GEAR UP Program Records

Such data, while impressive, does not tell the whole story. The general population targeted by the GEAR UP program is from low-income, minority families with low socioeconomic status. Students from these backgrounds tend to perform academically at or below the state's average. Furthermore, students enrolled in the statewide GEAR UP program were specifically identified as being "at risk" of not aspiring to and not being prepared for college.

Grant Two: Partnerships & Activities

The HECB has partnered with the Washington Education Foundation, the University of Washington, and multiple school districts to deliver GEAR UP services that are being funded through Grant Two.

Based on the success and experience of the first GEAR UP grant, the Washington State GEAR UP project has expanded to include the Washington Education Foundation's Achievers and HERO programs in 18 schools. Through a Request For Proposals process earlier this year, 12 school districts were selected as GEAR UP Scholars sites.

The program goal is to increase the college-going rate to 75 percent among GEAR UP participants.

The program will provide participating schools with the following services:

- **Early awareness outreach** - The GEAR UP Program provides early awareness activities to students and their families. Through outreach opportunities with partners in colleges, community-based organizations, and parent organizations, the program brings early college awareness to middle school students.

- **Early intervention** - The GEAR UP Program starts early. The program begins serving students when they are in seventh grade, with such intervention services as tutoring, mentoring, after-school and summer experiences, and college and financial aid information sessions that involve students, their families, teachers, community and college members, and school administrations. Early intervention is an important part of the success of GEAR UP.
- **Vigorous curriculum** - The GEAR UP Program provides information to students at both middle- and high-school levels regarding academic preparation and requirements for college. This information encourages students to think about their futures and plan accordingly. Each GEAR UP participant is encouraged to take more challenging courses in high school. GEAR UP also helps provide information on standardized tests, WASL assessments, and other test preparation information.
- **Professional development for teachers** - The GEAR UP program offers opportunities for teachers to participate in curriculum development workshops and conferences and to attend the University of Washington's Curriculum for Instructional Development activities.
- **Direct support in the college application and selection process** - The GEAR UP program works with school guidance directors and counselors to support students in the college application and selection process. The program also works with partners to organize college visits and works with other college preparation programs to deliver services.
- **Scholarships** - GEAR UP scholarships are an important component of the GEAR UP program. Each GEAR UP participant in the state program is eligible to receive a scholarship to help pay for college costs. This provides an added incentive to students and their families who might not be seriously thinking about going to college.

In addition, the scholarship component of the project has been revised to better manage the funding that is available for scholarships. Specifically, the following measures have been taken:

- All scholarships are funded through federal money. There is no on-going or unfunded state liability;
- \$600,000 is set aside annually to purchase GET units for future distribution; and
- Students are required to meet annual benchmarks in order to be eligible to receive the scholarship.

Next Steps

In spite of the success of college access programs such as GEAR UP—as well as other school programs such as Smaller Learning Communities, TRIO, and MESA—significant gaps remain in the four geographic corners of the state, the central Puget Sound area, and the central region of Eastern Washington. A large number of schools where more than 50 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch do not have meaningful college-access programs.

Expanding the GEAR UP model to increase the number of high school graduates in those school districts would fill a prominent gap in the state's early intervention programs. With appropriated state funds, the Washington GEAR UP project could extend outreach services to an additional 2,500 students in up to 25 school districts in underserved areas. Such funding also would be used as state match to the federal investment.

A proposal to expand the program using state dollars is included in the HECB Agency Budget Request item, under tab 6.